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Affects of the Russo-Ukrainian War in Georgia: Russian Voices in the Urban Spaces of Tbilisi

ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the ongoing transformation of the urban spaces in Tbilisi, Georgia, after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine starting from February 2022. More specifically, the authors focus on the increasingly frequent sounds of the Russian language in different public spaces of the capital city, triggering various unsettling emotions and anxiety among locals. By building on the affect theory, the paper explains how and why specific uncanny feelings emerge among Georgians while encountering Russian-speaking newcomers after 2022. Based on interviews and digital ethnography, the article connects individual affective responses to the larger historical and geopolitical events through the categories of voice, memory and language.

Keywords: *Affect; voice; memory; Russian language; Russo-Ukraine war; Russian imperialism; Tbilisi; Georgia.*

Introduction

In late May 2023, as the pleasant weather graced Tbilisi, and the streets became increasingly crowded, I arranged to meet a friend at the iconic Saakadze monument in the heart of the city[1]. As time passed and evening descended, I decided to take a moment to enjoy a cup of coffee at a nearby café. It was during this peaceful interlude that I couldn't help but notice how, after the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the presence of the Russian language and its distinct acoustics had become an integral part of Tbilisi's ambience. The sound of the Russian language could be heard everywhere in Tbilisi, whether in shops, cafes, parks, or on the bustling streets.

That afternoon, I chose to sit outside the café, and the place was relatively empty. Within moments,

[1] Writing the vignette in first person was a joint decision made by both authors to ensure conveying subjective feelings and experiences told in the stories. The ethnographic material has been collected and theoretically examined by Tea Kamushadze, while Nana Kobidze contributed with further theoretical and conceptual analysis.

a group of young men, aged between 20 and 30, entered the open-air section of the café, engaged in animated conversations in Russian, and took their seats. More of their friends soon joined them, filling up two tables. They seemed joyous, chatting away and capturing the moment in photographs. I could only catch fragments of their Russian chatter, which triggered a familiar yet complex mix of emotions within me. Whenever I hear this language being spoken, I instinctively search for the signs of the Ukrainian flag in my surroundings to soothe the unease stirred by these conversations. Especially after 2022, the flag of Ukraine became the symbol of anti-imperialist resistance against Putin's Russia for me and many others who have lived through the effects of Russian imperialism in the region. I search for the flag of Ukraine as it ensures for me that despite speaking the language associated with Russian imperialism, the person is against Putin and the war.

Before long, my friend Eliso (46) arrived, and our discussion shifted to the entry of Russians into Georgia and the latest global news. She mentioned that one of the young men in the group was one of our students, studying Russian philology. She greeted him warmly when she entered. We lingered for about 15-20 minutes, and as we were preparing to leave, the group of young men began singing in Russian. This further intensified my conflicting emotions, prompting me to hastily leave the scene. Out of the blue, my friend walked up to their table, came to a halt, and spoke in Russian:

> *"You know, I want to say that your singing is not bad at all, and I also appreciate Russian songs. However, I have a question for you: Can you imagine what it feels like for me to hear you sing in Russian here and today? Do you realize how your song resonates in a country that was bombed by your nation, leading to over 300,000 people becoming IDPs? Moreover, there's an ongoing war in Ukraine, with children dying?"*

I couldn't resist and moved a little further away, my nerves on edge as I anxiously awaited the unfolding of the situation. My curiosity about their reactions was intense, but my feelings of embarrassment, confusion, and despair kept me from staying put. I retreated, pondering what response they might offer. From a distance, it seemed that Eliso's intervention had not led to a heated argument. When she eventually joined me, I couldn't help but ask why she had approached them and what transpired during their conversation. She replied, "This was not planned, I'm not sure why I did it, it was as if some unseen force compelled me."

She continued, *"I believe they understood what I was trying to convey; they were attentive. However, a Georgian young man among them expressed that they didn't want to engage in politics. The others mentioned that they were Belarusians and had hoped that singing in Russian would not be a contentious issue."* Eliso added that while that might happen eventually, for now, the wounds were still fresh, and their Russian song felt like salt on an open wound.

As we walked out onto the street, my gaze fell upon the proudly displayed Ukrainian flag, and the surge of emotion it stirred within me after the Russo-Ukrainian war rushed back.

Soon after the war began, more than 120,000 citizens of the Russian Federation fled to the Georgian border; they settled mainly in two cities, Tbilisi and Batumi. Some of the local population perceived them more as economic migrants, who left Russia not because of anti-Putin sentiment, but to escape sanctions (Mühlfried, 2023). The various waves of migrants also had an impact on the local economy, including on the prices of products and the housing sector. The images of thousands of Russians queuing to cross the border in cars or on foot flashed across TV screens across Europe. The paper discusses how this sudden influx of Russians to Georgia's capital city has shaped the urban landscape and what reaction did it gave fuel to, while both the physical environment and the people living within it also serve as reflections of the evolving narrative of the war. In the immediate aftermath of the war's commencement, a strong sense of solidarity with Ukraine was evident as Tbilisi adorned itself with blue and yellow flags, mirroring the prevailing mood. However, this physical display was soon juxtaposed by the presence of Russian-speaking individuals emerging in the city. Their arrival created a noticeable tension within the urban environment. "Russians Go Home!", "RUZZKI Not Welcome!", "We Don't Speak Russian!", "No Russian is Welcome, Good or Bad!", "Putin is Killing People in Ukraine While Russians Eat Khachapuri in Georgia", "Russia is a Terrorist State!", "Moscow Will Burn!" – are just a few examples of the street markings appearing in Tbilisi after February 2022. The use of the Russian language in Tbilisi, on one hand, could lead to potential friction, while on the other hand, it rekindled connections for those whose use of the language had been severely limited since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, particularly in the wake of the August 2008 war.

Literature Review

Colonial Past of the Language

The dominance of Russia and the Russian language in Georgia and the Caucasus has a long history (Blauvelt, 2013). In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Georgian people – predominantly adhering to the Orthodox Christian Church and simultaneously caught between the Iranian and Ottoman empires, viewed Orthodox Christian Russia as a savior and a reliable ally. For Georgian kings, however, alliances with Russia ultimately led to the abolition of their kingdoms and the transformation of Georgia into Russian governorates. Within the Russian Empire, a colonial Russification policy was implemented, which mandated that all public affairs had to be conducted in the Russian language. In the 19th century, court proceedings were conducted entirely in Russian (Janelidze, 2005; Guruli & Vachnadze, 2001). Access to education, including higher education, was predominantly available in

Russian, and Georgian aristocrats traveled to Saint Petersburg to receive a university education.

From the mid-19th century, the so-called "Tergdaleulebi" (a group of Georgian intellectuals educated in Russia) became actively involved in the formation of a unified Georgian national identity, primarily by promoting the Georgian language and establishing a periodic press. This movement also prompted the creation of the Georgian theater in 1850. The Georgian language was a fundamental aspect of Ilia Chavchavadze's[2] vision of the Georgian nation. During Georgia's independence years (1918–1921), the establishment of the first Georgian university continued this effort, requiring the adaptation of scientific terminology into Georgian. Georgians educated abroad took this task seriously and regarded it as a crucial component of the national idea.

Following the Sovietization of Georgia in 1921, the process of Russification intensified further. During the Soviet period, the influence of the Russian language grew so much that linguistic interactions took on a bilingual character. It is worth noting that in the first decade of the Soviet Union's existence, the policy of Korenizatsiia ("indigenization") promoted the standardization of the national language in the Soviet republics. Nevertheless, in Soviet Georgia, the Russian language always coexisted alongside the Georgian language. Russian vocabulary penetrated almost every sphere of life, especially politics and professional fields (Tsibakhashvili, 2000). In the late Soviet era, in 1978, a significant student movement opposed Moscow's decision to remove the Georgian language from the constitution as the state language. This event led to the establishment of April 14th as the Day of the Georgian Language in Georgia.

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the significance of the Russian language declined but remained an important means of communication, particularly among ethnic minorities in Georgia and the peoples of the Caucasus. A 2012 study (ACT Research, 2012) found that Russian remained the most widely spoken foreign language in Georgia, with 96% of the population possessing some level of proficiency in it (BBC, 2012). However, following the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, efforts to remove the Russian language from public spaces became more pronounced. Since 2011, Russian is no longer a mandatory subject in Georgian schools. Additionally, national television channels no longer broadcast films dubbed into Russian (Tskhadaia, 2018). It is important to see these trends in the age bracket as well, as Russian language proficiency is significantly declining among younger generations. According to the CRRC 2024 study, 41% of Georgian citizens aged 55+ and 32% of citizens aged 18-34 have an intermediate level of Russian. It is clear that knowledge of Russian has been replaced by English among the younger generation, as according to the same data, only 2% of citizens aged 55+

[2] Ilia Chavchavadze was a Georgian writer and one of the founders of "Tergdaleulebi" movement.

have a high level of English, while this number increases to 27% among citizens aged 18-34.

Thus, the Russian language in Georgia is largely associated with Russian imperialism and the legacy of the Soviet regime, where its dominance was imposed at the expense of the country's sovereignty and the suppression of the local language.

Sound, Affect and Embodied Knowledge

Anthropologists have traditionally focused on studying cultures considered as the "other" and those in distant locations. However, with the shifting dynamics of our globalized world, the focal points and subjects of anthropological research are evolving. The myth of "objective truth", grounded in imperialist projects, has been long debunked by feminist, Marxist and postcolonial thinkers (Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988; Haraway, 1988). Since knowledge and reality is socially constructed and thus – situational, the only way to study it is through changing the research focus to the situated, or embodied knowledges (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1993). In other words, to understand the affective triggers experienced by local Georgians towards the sounds of the Russian language in Tbilisi, we need to study the embodied knowledge which prompted these affective reactions.

Being the most immovable organ of the human head, the ear is considered to be somewhat passive, which only takes but does not give. It is an organ that cannot turn away or close itself (Simmel, 1907). In his analysis "Sociology of Sense Impression," Georg Simmel (1907) talks about the conceptual differences between vision and hearing: a person can close their eyes or look away, but one cannot fully control what they hear. Consequently, ears lead to a completely different type of social knowledge. Other than that, hearing is supra-individual since whatever happens in a room must be heard by everyone who is present there. This type of sensory knowledge produced by shared lived experiences of colonialism can become "sound souvenirs" associated with traumatic events and can only be known intimately (Birdsall, 2009). Birdsall proposes to study the role of the sound within individual and collective context of remembering (ibid: 169). In this regard, involuntary remembering of traumatic experiences can lead to reoccurring emptions and moods to the similar sensory triggers in the present day. Accordingly, reoccurring encounters with the Russian language can act as a sensory reminder for people who have lived through traumatic events of Russia's imperialist policies and wars (e.g. in the South Caucasus and Ukraine), reactivate their sensory memory and lead to unsettling affective responses. This type of sensory, or in other terms – embodied knowledge, is subjective and situated in its nature, which, as argued earlier, does not lessen its factuality or truth.

When contemplating the impact of Russian migrants on Tbilisi's urban landscape in the aftermath of the Russia-Ukraine war, the concept of affect emerges as an analytical tool. The theory of affect

provides a lens through which we can understand the current conjuncture that has been largely formed by the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and continues to influence our immediate surroundings, compelling us to respond. Affect encompasses a wide range of reactions, emotions and sensations stemming from the war, including the recollection of our own experiences and re-activation of collective memory of Russian imperialist wars in Georgia, the fate of our Ukrainian allies, and the influx of Russian migrants. This conjuncture of various geopolitical events and individual affects cannot be comprehended and described solely through language; they permeate every corner of the city, evoking a range of unsettling emotions among individuals as affective responses. Consequently, these affective responses manifest themselves as various actions and reactions, becoming subjects of scrutiny and judgment.

Anthropologists have long argued that emotions are the mirror of the social (Briggs, 1970; Levy, 1975; Lutz, 1988) and that "...emotions too, are cultural artefacts in man" (Geertz, 1973, 81). According to Sara Ahmed (2014), who has examined different emotional states (including grief, shame and fear), affective responses are the result of specific emotional encounters as well as initial prerequisite and dispositions. For instance, a national grief as a phenomenon would not be possible without the pre-existence of nation itself as an emotional matter. The influx of new Russian-speaking migrants within the urban spaces of Tbilisi gives rise to affect through the instinctual encounters between people, sounds and the built environment. This meeting point activates diverse experiences and emotions among the local population, which are expressed in diverse ways and shaped both by the individual and the surrounding milieu.

In the realm of social sciences and humanities, the concept of affect has become a complex and multifaceted category. As Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (2010) suggest, affect is not a singular, concrete thing; rather, it is a process, a continuum. At its core, affect can be described as a force of encounter that insists beyond emotion and "can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension" (Gregg & Seigworth 2010:1). Gregg and Seigworth identifies three integral layers within affect: first, the act of contact, touch, or collision that engenders specific feelings and alters our perception of the world; second, the existence of a continuous line of variation and continuity that encapsulates our experiences; and third, the contextual backdrop, which implies diverse potentials for development. According to the authors, the body has the capacity to affect and to be affected; moreover, affect and cognition are never fully separable and therefore, affect is inherently embodied (ibid: 2-3). As we delve into the affective reactions of the residents of Tbilisi to the sounds of the Russian language, it will become apparent how auditory memory from the past, which is by itself – embodied, give rise to present-day distressing affects.

Methodology

Recognizing that an anthropologist's identity and role persist both in the field and at home, we embarked on observing these changing processes even before the onset of the war. The observation initially focused on the virtual realm, particularly as tensions escalated with Moscow's threats and the evacuation of the American diplomatic corps from Kiev. It was through this rhetoric, online discussions, profile picture frames, and hashtags within social networks that the prevailing theme of Ukraine became evident. Consequently, various methods were utilized, including digital ethnography, visual fixation techniques, and interviews. Notably, Tbilisi is not just our field of study; it is our hometown, where we were raised and educated, and where we have been employed. This made the selection of storytellers a complex process. The Russian language and interactions with Russian migrants have become integral aspects of our daily lives. To narrow down our research focus, we have selected individuals closely connected with the Russian language, who teach Georgian through various methods and in diverse forms, as our primary narrators. The interviews have been conducted between 2023 and 2024. It should also be acknowledged that the Russian language has been a constant factor in our life since our earliest memories, influencing our perspective either positively or negatively. This subjective relationship with the language, coupled with its significance, led us to adopt a framework rooted in the theory of affect. Within this framework, perception and its emotional underpinnings assume a pivotal role.

Discussion

Affect and Language

Sofia's (40) journey into learning the Georgian language began in the 6th grade, upon her return to her native Abkhazia from Russia after the war in 1993. Born in Abkhazia, Sofia's family had temporarily relocated to Russia when she was only 4-5 years old due to business reasons. However, because of the war, they couldn't return for nine years. Within her family, they spoke Megrelian[3], while Russian was used outside the home.

At that time, the need for using the Georgian language didn't arise. Nevertheless, Sofia's protest towards the Russian language emerged in her early childhood. She would often question her family about why they lived in Russia, believing that Russians had taken away their home in Abkhazia, followed by war-induced forced displacement in 1992-93. These questions from her youth remained unanswered.

[3] Megrelian is part of the Kartvelian language family spoken in Western Georgia, predominantly in Samegrelo region.

Sofia's family and relatives envisioned a brighter future for her in Russia. A close relative residing there saw the life opportunities available for a child, so they were taken aback when Sofia expressed her desire to learn Georgian. Sofia recalls teaching herself the Georgian alphabet while still in Russia. Upon returning to their native home in Gali, she resolved to master the Georgian language completely. In the sixth grade, she had to memorize all subjects because she had no knowledge of Georgian.

Every day, she walked 8 kilometers to and from school, with the school and her home separated by a de facto border, patrolled by Russian peacekeepers and Abkhaz border guards. Crossing this border daily served as additional motivation for Sofia to learn Georgian and feel like a true Georgian citizen. Once, during a routine document check by the Abkhazian border guard, he inquired about her last name, which happened to match a murder suspect of one of the Abkhazian leaders. The guard asked why she was there in Russian. 14-year-old Sofia responded boldly, saying, "This is my land; what are you doing here?" The border guard was so angered by her response that he aimed his gun at her, but thankfully, other Abkhazian border guards saved the young girl.

Sofia was determined to master the Georgian language and even wished to pursue higher education in Georgia. Despite her family's skepticism, especially her grandmother's, who believed she would not be accepted, and arrangements would be made for her to attend a university in Russia, Sofia surprised everyone by gaining admission to a Georgian university, albeit falling a bit short of a scholarship. Unfortunately, she couldn't study English philology due to her limited knowledge of the language, so she opted for Russian philology while also studying the fundamentals of the Georgian language. She graduated from the university with honors.

Later, she had the opportunity to teach the Georgian language through a special state project. For a year, she commuted daily to Marneuli – a municipality in southern Georgia predominantly populated by ethnic Azerbaijanis, teaching Georgian to Georgian citizens in an Azerbaijani school. This experience revealed to her that language teaching and human relationships were her true calling.

Since then, she has taught both Georgian and Russian in various universities and established a language center in Tbilisi for five years, where she has helped numerous Georgian and foreign individuals learn the language of their choice through various formats. Her language center is situated in one of the most densely populated central neighborhoods and her schedule is filled with teaching and organizing the language learning process.

When asked about the changes following the Russia-Ukraine war, Sofia explained that she had made a principled decision to cease teaching the Russian language, despite high demand. She now teaches Georgian to anyone interested, including Russians. Alongside language instruction, she emphasizes to them that if they intend to stay in Georgia, learning Georgian is essential, as no one here

is obligated to serve them in their language. She incorporates topics such as Georgia's Independence Day and Georgian Language Day into her lessons to help her students grasp the local context.

Sofia's Russian-speaking students often tell her that they're frequently not given the opportunity to speak Georgian. When they initiate conversations in Georgian, Georgians respond in Russian. Sofia is unfazed by this and offers several possible explanations, such as Georgians struggling to imagine a Georgian-speaking Russian or simply showing sympathy and avoiding offense, even though she asserts that speaking Russian is a choice rather than an obligation.

Regarding the biggest challenge in teaching the Georgian language to a Russian-speaking audience, Sofia doesn't hesitate in her response. She cites the psychological state of her audience, many of whom are stressed, depressed, angry, or upset. In such circumstances, teaching becomes challenging. To protect both herself and her students, Sofia adopts an inclusive approach. When asked about her students' backgrounds or nationalities, she doesn't inquire. When discussing conversational vocabulary, she is careful and employs methods such as random selection of cards to determine who is from where and where they are headed, allowing for a more comfortable and inclusive learning experience.

Sofia is remarkably fluent in three languages and she shared her thoughts regarding her perspective on these languages:

> "*When I speak in Megrelian, it takes me back to my home and village in Abkhazia. When I speak Georgian, I feel like a true Georgian and take immense pride in it. But when I speak Russian, it triggers a deep-seated internal protest that has been with me since childhood. I remember telling myself that language shouldn't matter and that I should know it, at the very least because I've had to provide adequate responses to both Russians and Abkhazians on numerous occasions."*

Prior to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, only 10% of her time was dedicated to teaching Georgian. However, since then, she has shifted her focus entirely to teaching Georgian and has chosen not to teach Russian. She has also faced criticism for teaching Russians but refrains from engaging in debates on the matter. She believes that she is dedicated to her work in teaching Georgian and does not compromise her principles.

Sofia's friend, Nia (36), has been teaching Georgian for 12 years. Initially, she focused on teaching Armenian and Azerbaijani-speaking students as part of a special state program. She is actively involved in the creation of teaching resources for the Georgian language and has amassed significant experience in this field. Nia approaches her work with creativity and views it from a business perspective. Over the past few years, the number of her students has steadily increased, and at the time

of our meeting, she had more than 30 Russian-speaking students.

Nia is confident when teaching Georgian and places considerable emphasis on the mood and emotional factors in the learning process. Most of her classes are conducted online, which saves time for both instructors and students.

Nia recalled her first Russian-speaking student, and she mentioned that it was a Russian man she heard about while teaching a mixed group remotely during the Covid-19 pandemic. Subsequently, she taught a group consisting of Russians and Ukrainians together before the outbreak of the war. One woman in this group, who had relocated to Batumi, shared that she had made the decision to leave Russia and move to Georgia because she no longer wanted to live there. She had made significant efforts to persuade her children to move with her, but it had been a struggle.

As this group progressed in their language learning journey, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 began. Nia recalls that during a lesson, the Ukrainian students couldn't contain their emotions and broke down in tears. Some of them had their parents in bunkers, while others were struggling to obtain information about their loved ones. Although a lady from Russia tried to apologize on her part and calm down the Ukrainians, the atmosphere within the group remained tense. Due to these circumstances, Nia, in agreement with the administration, suspended teaching the Georgian language for a few weeks.

At the outset of the Russia-Ukraine war, Nia held a strongly negative attitude towards Russia and openly expressed it on her social media platforms. During the meetings with the Russian-speaking individuals, who reached out to her for in-person language instruction, she greeted them wearing a hair bow in the colors of the Ukrainian flag, and would often begin the conversation by acknowledging, "Our country is occupied by your country." This approach led to some students not responding at all. She acknowledges that these were rather blunt ways of conveying her stance.

Presently, she no longer adopts such a confrontational demeanor, although she retains the same internal viewpoint. Direct interactions and unfolding events have expanded and deepened her personal dilemmas. Nia is well aware that the Russians seeking her instruction are stepping out of their comfort zones and being compelled to learn Georgian, even though many of them feel that they have no need for the language and are doing so out of necessity. According to her, being under her tutelage serves as a form of therapy for some individuals. Particularly during unconventional lessons, they occasionally bake mchadi (Georgian cornbread) together and raise toasts in Georgian.

Recently, students are no longer asked about their place of origin; it is revealed during the teaching process. Nia mentions that she discovers their origins through study prompts like "Where am I from?". Nia fondly recalls several students who, when asked about their origins, named Georgian cities and

avoided mentioning Russia altogether. She also remembers one student who hailed from Siberia but spoke about Tbilisi's weather instead of describing the climate in his hometown. When Nia inquired about Siberia, presuming it must be quite cold there, the student replied, "It's not my hometown; I'm not from there."

Nia's teaching resources prominently feature the Georgian context, placing special emphasis on Georgian Language Day and the history of its suppression. This narrative often becomes an eye-opener for her Russian-speaking listeners. Occasionally, she encounters protests from Russian-speaking students. For example, one student expressed bewilderment at Georgians' attitude toward the Russian language, considering it foolish. In his view, Russian has produced important literature and culture, and he couldn't comprehend why he shouldn't be able to watch movies or plays in Russian in Tbilisi. Nia jokingly responded that she would teach him Georgian so well, that watching plays and movies in Georgian wouldn't be a problem.

As observed by Nia, most of her students have adapted well to life in Tbilisi. They have found everything they need and established their own communities, including cafes, salons, and social gatherings. One of her students even bought nine apartments in Tbilisi. Any slight discomfort they might encounter in the streets is easily balanced by indulging in Georgian cuisine.

Nia believes that for many of her Russian-speaking students, learning Georgian is more of a statement, a means of gaining moral superiority over other Russians who do not put any effort into even learning the local language. Nevertheless, there is a remarkably high demand for learning Georgian, and if she had the capacity and time, she believes the number of her students could triple.

When asked about the increased use of the Russian language in Tbilisi, she cited a specific example to illustrate her point:

> *"There was a Russian language class at my son's public school in Tbilisi, and initially, no one signed up. However, after the war, twenty children [local Georgians] enrolled. It seems the times have changed. In the context of business, my close friend has expressed disbelief in the potential usefulness of Russian language skills, stating that she would never have imagined it to be valuable in a million years!"*

Nia contemplates that the perception of the Russian language varies within different social circles in Tbilisi. In her view, the influx of Russian migrants has notably reactivated the use of Russian among ethnic minorities in the city. She vividly recalls that she had never noticed Russian being used within her Armenian-speaking groups before, and she was taken aback when her students began conversing in Russian.

In addition to Nia and Sofia, other Georgian language teachers have also shared their experiences,

who have been instructing various groups and private individuals for years. It's important to note that the majority of them find teaching Georgian perfectly acceptable, and they disagree with the principled stance that they might be aiding their adversaries by doing so.

Eliso shared that she has one Russian-speaking student who is of Georgian ethnicity, and she enthusiastically assists a first-year student raised in Vladikavkaz who, despite having a Georgian surname, barely speaks Georgian. She doesn't see any issue with teaching an ethnic Russian as long as she knows their stance regarding Georgia and their perspective on current events.

Similarly, Salome (35) believes that teaching the Georgian language shouldn't be problematic. She personally refrains from doing so primarily due to time constraints and her limited experience in that direction. Her experience teaching Georgian to Russian speakers is connected to her cousin, who arrived in Georgia after the Russia-Ukraine war started and couldn't understand a word of Georgian. Salome also mentioned that she finds the enthusiasm of Georgians who returned from Russia to learn their native language particularly heartwarming. She acknowledges that there are differing viewpoints on these matters within Georgian society. These differences can sometimes become intense in public discourse, and some individuals express aggression not only towards Russian speakers but also towards those who show kindness to them.

Salome explained that like others, she gets irritated by the tone of some Russians and their expectation that Georgians should speak Russian. However, if a confused or disoriented Russian asks her something on the street, she half-jokingly says that she's afraid to respond in Russian, fearing a possible overreaction from Georgian society.

Gvantsa (52) specializes in second language teaching and has been involved in both academic research and practical work in this field for a long time. When talking about her attitude towards teaching Russian-speaking students, she mentioned that this year she has two such groups, with the majority hailing from Dagestan. Consequently, this situation doesn't pose a moral dilemma for her. Depending on her language teaching approach, she minimizes the use of a common language (be it English or Russian). Regarding the use of Russian in public spaces and her general approach, she exercises caution since a Russian speaker could be Ukrainian. In such cases, she opts to converse in Russian. For interactions with Russians, she prefers to use English. Gvantsa is perfectly fluent in Russian, largely due to her Ukrainian grandmother. She recalled an incident after the Russo-Georgian war in 2008 when she was on a scientific mission in Europe. Her European colleagues wanted to converse in Russian with their Georgian counterparts to practice the language. However, she and her Georgian colleagues held a principled stance against speaking Russian on that occasion.

Following the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Natia (50), recognizing her responsibility as a citizen of

Georgia, decided to go beyond passive protest against Russian expatriates. When she hears loud conversations in Russian on the streets, she approaches them and politely requests that they lower their voices, citing the presence of representatives from Putin's imperialist state. Natia explains to them that the ongoing situation is partly their responsibility since their escape doesn't help the problem. Initially, when Russians arrived in Tbilisi, they reacted to her comments with anger, but now they simply listen to her. Besides Georgian, Natia is proficient in several languages, including Russian, allowing her to articulate her perspective fluently.

Natia has been actively involved in a Georgian language training program for over five years, contributing to integration projects. Having lived in various European countries, she draws from their experiences in addition to her linguistic skills. Upon returning to Georgia, she, along with friends, established a crafts workshop that not only serves as a business but also as a creative outlet. This workshop served as the foundation for a social enterprise for retired women. After the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Natia employed two Ukrainian women in this enterprise, wholeheartedly supporting Ukrainians.

Natia firmly believes that teaching Georgian to Russian migrants is not the way forward. She views their sudden interest in learning the language in Tbilisi as a matter of respect for her country, but given the circumstances, she is uncomfortable with the idea of some Russian migrants staying on in Georgia. While she is enthusiastic about teaching Georgian to Ukrainians, she holds a different stance when it comes to Russians.

Lastly, we would like to go back to Eliso's personal journey of learning Russian, how this language became her second language, and the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian war on her attitude. Eliso has been teaching the Georgian language to students from Georgia and beyond for over seven years. Currently pursuing a doctoral program in anthropology, she examines events and processes through the lens of culture, observing how and why individuals learn a language and the cultural factors involved in teaching.

Over the years, Eliso frequently incorporated Russian expressions, phrases, and individual words into her everyday conversations, especially when she wishes to convey stronger emotions. According to her, this occurs involuntarily and can sometimes be a source of discomfort for her.

Eliso hails from Kutaisi, a city with less ethnic diversity compared to Tbilisi. She shared that she had a Soviet upbringing, beginning her Russian studies in the second grade. The sole language of instruction at her school was Russian. She fondly remembers her upper-class Russian teacher who ignited her passion for Pushkin and Russian literature.

Eliso's exposure to Russian extended beyond the classroom — she watched Russian-language

animations, listened to Russian music, watched movies in their original language, and read Russian fiction. She revealed that until recently, most of the songs on her playlist were in Russian, featuring artists like Vysotsky and others. For her, Russian had become a significant tool for expressing her emotions. She also mentioned that she had never associated Russian with people but rather with art and culture since childhood, so her perspective remained unchanged after the collapse of the USSR. Additionally, Russian became the language of scientific literature for her, as many materials were available in Russian, unlike in Georgian. Consequently, Russian served as a convenient means for her to access scholarly literature.

She mentioned that following the Russia-Ukraine war, she ceased listening to Russian music and stopped watching content in the language. The Russian language she encountered in the streets now irritates her. This irritation isn't directed at specific individuals, although the Russian language itself triggers strong emotions in her.

When talking about how she feels when she hears Russian spoken on the streets of Tbilisi, she explained:

> *"It's a terrible feeling when I hear the Russian language. I cannot, under any circumstances, say that I feel personal hostility towards someone, unless they explicitly show the opposite. When I hear them speaking, it stirs up a feeling of offense within me. I become bitter, and I wish not to hear it at all. It's simply unacceptable." (Eliso 2023).*

Eliso had primarily used Russian for academic purposes, as her proficiency in English and German didn't necessitate her to engage with scientific literature in her field of study. However, she grapples with the emotions stirred by the speech or actions of a solitary Russian migrant, much like many others living in Tbilisi, all of whom carry personal histories shaped by coexistence with them. She also recounted an incident that occurred at a prestigious salon in the Vake district, the center of Tbilisi. When she arrived without an appointment and asked for service, she was directed to a Russian-speaking girl who knew neither Georgian nor English. She spoke to Eliso in Russian, instructing her to sit down. In response, Eliso spoke in Georgian, to which the girl replied in Russian, expressing her lack of understanding of Georgian. While Russian and Armenian, alongside Georgian, were not uncommon in this salon, encountering someone who hadn't bothered to learn even a few basic Georgian phrases was a different experience for her. Eliso decided she no longer wished to patronize their services and explained her reasons, though she remained uncertain about the salon staff's reaction.

Such incidents and countless others unfold in the city, where the Russian language has always been foreign. However, the current global and Georgian context has transformed the way the language is perceived in Tbilisi, giving rise to various reactions and actions. In this context, the role of bodily

perception and experience is particularly significant, influencing individuals' rational decision-making regarding how to act, guided by their embodied knowledge and the experiences tied to their language usage.

Conclusion

The increasing sounds of Russian language in the urban spaces of Tbilisi has resulted in mixed and unsettling emotions among the local Georgians. Emotions such as anger, fear, anxiety, feelings of injustice and bitterness are deeply rooted in the traumatic experiences of war, exile and colonial encounters with the Russian language, leading to moral dilemmas and differing reactions. Direct or indirect personal encounters with Russian imperialism have been significantly shaped by the sounds of the language, leaving indelible traces on them. Building on Simmel's (1997) "Sociology of Sense Impression", feminist critic of knowledge production (Haraway, 1988) and the theory of affect (Gregg & Seigworth 2010), we look at these emotional reactions as the outcome of embodied knowledge people have from the past experiences.

Looking at Russia as an imperialist power, and the Russian language as an instrument of this imperialist power, many of our interlocutors had a hard time approaching the language as a neutral phenomenon. After all, many of them learned Russian with a top-down approach through the school system which still functioned under the shadows of the Soviet regime. This imperialist influence is vividly reflected in Elisos' story regarding the availability of academic literature in Russian, instead of Georgian.

Interestingly, some of our interlocutors had moral dilemmas regarding speaking Russian themselves. While some preferred not to speak the language at all, others could speak in Russian to Ukrainians and felt less anxiety regarding it since Ukrainians share common colonial past with Georgians. Moral dilemmas also occurred in regard to teaching Georgian to Russians: on the one hand, it could be perceived as an act of respect from the Russians' side, who have decided to live in Georgia, or even a decolonial project – Russians speaking Georgian instead of vice versa; on the other hand, it triggered further national anxiety among Georgians regarding Russian's resettlement to Georgia, which could potentially lead to further colonization for them.

Given these points, the affective reactions towards the Russian language have also been largely influenced by the ongoing full-scale invasion of Ukraine and intensified people's fears and anxieties regarding the future of the region. As Gregg and Seigworth (2010) suggests, affect is not a fixed phenomenon but a process, a continuum, which can change over time and space. As observed during the interviews, the intense negative affects towards Russians and the Russian language have somewhat

lessened over time, since local Georgians learned to cohabit with the new social reality. Yet, anxiety and uncanny feelings still prevail among people. Recently, Eliso shared a nightmare she saw at night: there was a celebration at a kindergarten in Kazbegi municipality and the children were singing in Russian language. The deepest fears of the colonial history repeating all over again continues to live subconsciously and can take different forms.

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